

GÖTTEN'S REAL GAME? AN UNRESOLVED ENIGMA IN
HEINRICH BÖLL'S
DIE VERLORENE EHRE DER KATHARINA BLUM

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Among the dramatic incidents likely to impress themselves on any audience's memory of Volker Schlöndorff and Margaretha von Trotta's screen version of *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* (1975) many of the most vivid concern the kind of police presence used to gain entry to Katharina Blum's flat near the beginning and the vast array of special forces deployed later on to surround and arrest Ludwig Götten when he is holed up in what the novel refers to as Sträubleder's 'Zweitvilla'.¹ As Wolf Donner put it in his review of the film, 'die Polizei packt zu, mit einem absurden Aufwand, in einer ans Mittelalter oder an Science-fiction-Bilder erinnernden Maskerade'.² Images of massive body armour, visored helmets, shields and guns in the first sequence find their inflationary counterpart in the shots of armoured personnel-carriers, helicopters and the overriding sense of the greatly outnumbering of one quarry in the villa episode. Böll's original novel would seem to have little to match this degree of tactical 'overkill' or quite the same amount of intimidating detail. Section 11 merely registers that Katharina Blum's flat has been 'streng bewacht' during the night Ludwig Götten spends there with her; and subsequently, we are informed, 'als bis 10.30 Uhr am Donnerstagsmorgen weder telefoniert worden war, noch Götten die Wohnung verlassen hatte, drang man, da Beizmenne die Geduld und auch die Nerven zu verlieren begann, mit acht schwerbewaffneten Polizeibeamten in die Wohnung, stürmte sie regelrecht unter strengsten Vorsichtsmaßnahmen' (pp. 23f.). The ensuing villa episode in Section 48 is presented in a similarly less melodramatic³ way than it was in the film-version: 'es sei per Hubschrauber, der natürlich nicht in Hörnähe gelandet sei, sofort ein Spezialtrupp in Marsch gesetzt, auf die Hochsitze verteilt worden, am andern Morgen sei die lokale Polizeidienststelle durch weitere zwei Dutzend Beamte auf die diskreteste Weise verstärkt worden' (p. 158).

While the idea of the police staking out the villa where Götten is now known to be hiding from the vantage-point offered by local-hunting shelters neatly brings out the fact that a rather vengeful and primitive *manhunt* is in progress, Böll's novel does not make as much as the film does of the

¹ Heinrich Böll, *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum oder: Wie Gewalt entsteht und wohin sie führen kann*, Cologne 1974, p. 158. All subsequent reference to Böll's novel in the body of my argument will be to this edition.

² 'Der lüsterne Meinungsterror. Ein Buch, ein Film, eine deutsche Krankheit', *Die Zeit*, Nr. 42 (10th October, 1975), p. 44.

³ That the film-version of *Katharina Blum* is melodramatic by comparison with the original novel is a charge that has frequently been levelled against it. See, for instance, Siegfried Schober, 'Die Heilige Johanna der Schlagzeilen', *Der Spiegel*, 41 (1975), 169f.

numbers of police and the sheer amount of weaponry being deployed simply in order to ensure that Götten is put finally behind bars. In David Head's words, the location in the Schlöndorff/Trotta film is literally 'swarming with paramilitary hardware – the sledge-hammer used to crack the nut'.⁴ Böll's novel does, nevertheless, possess other equivalents to this sense of the 'absurder Aufwand' being put into the capture of one man, especially given what he turns out to have allegedly done. The features I have in mind are, first, the fact that by the time the story starts 'der Fall Ludwig Götten' has been engaging both 'Polizei und Staatsanwaltschaft' for well over a year (p. 42) – or one and a half years even, if the notorious 'ZEITUNG' is ever to be believed (cf. p. 48) – and, second, the information that they have for some time been engaged in quite a sophisticated phonetapping and surveillance exercise in order finally to run him to ground. Even in the heady days of the early seventies, with the Federal Police's Operation 'Winterreise' in full swing, one would expect some fictive equivalent of the Baader-Meinhof-Group to be in evidence in order to justify such pronounced attention. Certainly, the manpower deployed is more than was felt necessary to surround and enter Böll's own country-house in the Eifel in June 1972, even though the ostensible ground for the raid was the possibility that Böll was at the time harbouring RAF activists on his premises. Admittedly, in the volatile mood of that period large-scale swoops were sometimes staged on the basis of an unreliable tip-off or in the hope that some big fish would be accidentally caught in the dragnet. In the part of Edgar Reitz's *Die zweite Heimat* covering the time in question, a police helicopter-raid on a moving passenger train is depicted in some detail in order to give some sense of the repressive measures deemed necessary to combat what were as often as not imaginary enemies of democracy.

Eventually, so Section 54 of *Katharina Blum* would seem to suggest, the intense police interest in Götten turns out to be little more than a storm in a teacup. For Götten is on their own admission far from being the kind of criminal that the authorities on his tail assumed him to be, although it does sound as if they are as yet far from being anxious to admit in public that this is the case:

Wie Hach Blorna vertraulich mitteilte, wird man die Mordanklage gegen Götten wahrscheinlich nicht aufrechterhalten können und also nicht erheben. Daß er aus der Bundeswehr nicht nur desertiert ist, sondern diese segensreiche Einrichtung außerdem erheblich geschädigt hat (auch materiell, nicht nur moralisch), gilt als erwiesen. Nicht Bankraub, sondern totale Ausplünderung eines Safes, der den Wehrsold für zwei Regimenter und erhebliche Geldreserven enthielt; außerdem Bilanzfälschung, Waffendiebstahl. Nun, man muß auch für ihn mit acht bis zehn Jahren rechnen. (p. 174)

⁴ "Der Autor muß respektiert werden" – Schlöndorff/Trotta's *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* and Brecht's Critique of Film Adaptation', *GLL*, 37 (1979), 257.

The 'auch für ihn', of course, links his crime with Katharina's eventual murder of the journalist Tötges, an act which is likely to carry a similar penalty. But this is not the same as implying that they are of a comparable magnitude; it is the Establishment's, and possibly contemporary society's, false scheme of values which is being implicitly criticised here.

Most commentators have taken their cue from this late revelation near the end of a highly ramified intrigue-novel and concluded that the crimes attributed to the Götten whom both police and press seem to have, in collusion, made up their minds about (and are hounding in that spirit) have little to do with the facts that emerge at the eleventh hour in the proceedings. Hence, Robert C. Conard is happy to sum Götten up as 'a deserter, a defrauder, a safecracker, and a thief (of a car and weapons)', at the same time as rightly emphasising that 'he is not, as the *News* proclaims, a murderer and bankrobber'.⁵ Wolf Donner in similar vein sees Götten as being ultimately depicted as no more than 'ein harmloser "kleiner Fisch"' in the novel, although wondering whether the film is not more fuzzy on this issue.⁶ And James H. Reid concludes that 'neither Katharina nor Ludwig Götten, her lover, is a terrorist. The latter, it turns out, is merely a deserter from the army who had run off with the regimental cash-box. The deployment of police resources is made to appear disproportionate and even counterproductive, as he panics when surrounded by police and uses a firearm.'⁷ (Reid sees an actual historical parallel to the events surrounding the arrest of Peter Paul Zahl.) Even if one adds to the charges the fact that Götten has for some time been carrying around a stolen gun, it would still remain difficult, as Reid and Head convincingly point out, to square such relatively petty offences with the massive expenditure of police effort over a long period of time in trying to capture Götten.

What all this leaves one with, then, is a situation where the police can be seen to overreact – either because they are the victims of the generally 'trigger-happy' atmosphere of the time (in the wake of the RAF's various exploits and the near-paranoid counter-measures taken by the State, if one assumes the fiction to be a plausible comment on the social climate in which it was written); or because they are grossly inefficient in ascertaining what kind of criminal (if one at all) they are dealing with; or because, at least in the case of the raid on Sträubleder's villa, they have themselves become dupes of the same popular press that they have been feeding with inflammatory inside information. It is difficult to imagine which of these possibilities is the least flattering for the police's image in the work.

A further reflection of the hysterical mood of the time can be found in Section 4 of *Katharina Blum*, where we hear: 'Ob auch der Bildjournalist Adolf Schönner, den man erst am Aschermittwoch in einem Waldstück westlich der fröhlichen Stadt ebenfalls erschossen fand, ein Opfer der Blum

⁵ Heinrich Böll (Twayne's World Authors Series, 622), Boston 1981, pp. 192f.

⁶ 'Der lüsterne Meinungsterror', p. 44.

⁷ Heinrich Böll, *A German for his Time*, Oxford 1988, p. 182.

gewesen war, galt eine Zeitlang als nicht unwahrscheinlich, später aber, als man eine gewisse chronologische Ordnung in den Ablauf gebracht hatte, als "erwiesen unzutreffend" (pp. 13f.). However, this information can be read in two ways. That Katharina Blum is immediately suspected of the murder of a second journalist because she has gone to the police and admitted to killing Tötges suggests a general mood of contagious suspicion. Yet the speed with which this matter is cleared up nevertheless contrasts markedly with the long period of time during which seemingly unfounded suspicions are harboured concerning Götten's activities. The pace of the authorities' response to the Blum case would appear to be different from that of their reactions to the Götten case.

When it comes to Ludwig Götten's actual activities, the novel itself adds one important further complicating factor to the situation, albeit ironically presenting it as no more than a mere inconsequential footnote to the main events (hence its use of 'übrigens'): that is to say, the question-begging telephone-calls that Götten made while he was hiding out at the villa: 'Übrigens handelte es sich bei den Telefonkontakten, die Götten von Sträubleders Villa aus aufnahm, ausschließlich um Bundeswehrangehörige oder deren Frauen, darunter Offiziersfrauen. Man rechnet mit einem Skandal mittleren Umfangs' (pp. 174f.).

The distinct possibility raised here that Götten was not in fact a lone opportunistic outlaw but was in some way in league with others has already surfaced as an attractive speculation at a number of earlier junctures in Böll's novel. Katharina Blum herself is at one stage suspected by the police of being implicated in a ring. We hear of 'Beizmenne's Theorie von einer großen Verschwörung, in die Katharina verwickelt sei' (p. 45), although the idea admittedly finds little favour with Beizmenne's colleague Moeding. We again come back to the 'Verschwörungstheorie' later on in Section 38, with the possible group now widened to encompass the Blornas and Katharina's mysterious male visitor: 'die Verbindung - Rote Trude-Banden - Katharina-Herrenbesuch' now being associated with the putative existence of a strategic 'Umschlagplatz' (p. 117). In this same passage, the further suggestion is floated that any such wider conspiracy must in all probability be of a political nature: 'wenn er (i.e. Götten) wirklich ein Bankräuber ist, wird er das System durchschaut haben'. Yet, surprisingly, this idea is not developed. In this connexion, Conrad expresses the consensus view with his conclusion that Götten's 'accomplices are not political radicals', but at most 'corrupt members of the military'.⁸

In an interview conducted by Manfred Durzak shortly after the appearance of the novel, the author himself is most emphatic in his attempt to establish the limits of Götten's crimes and misdemeanours and to scotch the suggestion that there is anything political to his activities. Given the number of unwarranted attacks that he had recently suffered on account of misreadings of *Katharina Blum*, Böll no doubt had good cause to want to

⁸ Heinrich Böll, p. 193.

make the matter appear as clear as possible, if not (as I shall wish to argue is the case) clearer than it is actually made in the novel itself. According to him:

Der Ludwig ist kein politischer Verbrecher, ganz eindeutig nicht, er ist ein Deserteur und Defraudant, und seine Verbündeten sind in der Bundeswehr und nicht in einer politischen Untergrundsituation, auch seine Mittäter. Sie sind beide gar nicht politisch motiviert, wie man das heute nennt, sondern eigentlich ziemlich realistisch. Der Typ hat geklaut und ist abgehauen und wird gesucht. Auf Grund von Mißverständnissen wird das politisiert, eigentlich nur von der Polizei, die aber bald merkt, daß er's nicht ist.

Later in the same interview Böll reinforces the point with the following remark about the way Götten is presented: 'auf der einen Seite ist er ein Typ, der klaut, desertiert und irgendwelche dunkle Geschäfte macht, einen Porsche klaut und damit herumfährt; aber auf der andern Seite erscheint er aus der Perspektive des Mädchens als liebenswerte positive Figur.'⁹

As far as Böll is concerned here, 'der einzige Einstieg in die Baader-Meinhof-Problematik' in *Katharina Blum*, 'abgesehen von der Technik der Verfolgung und der Aufheizung in der Presse' lies in the way in which the heroine is related to what he calls the 'Sympathisanten-Problem'. Repeatedly Böll has preferred to stress the similarities between Katharina's predicament and the Brückner-affair¹⁰ rather than raise the possibility of any real analogy between Götten's own earlier activities and those of the RAF itself. But even then, the parallel identified is a loose one; it exists only in the sense that Katharina Blum is assumed to be a sympathizer of no more than an *alleged* terrorist, when in reality all she is is the unsuspecting lover of a man about whose past she knows virtually nothing. Götten, so even the police have in the end to concede, is not a terrorist in the RAF mould; and by that token Katharina is not a real 'Sympathisant', since he has not perpetrated the kind of crimes which make this term appropriate. Therefore the closest we come to an analogy with contemporary events in West Germany would seem to be in the not dissimilar mechanisms of public prejudice, of media manipulation thereof, particularly in the gutter press's behaviour, and the hand-in-glove relationship between certain representatives of the law and some journalists from the 'ZEITUNG'.

The enigma that remains in the novel if not the film, *pace* Böll and his retrospective clarifications in response to various 'Mißverständnisse' he felt the work had caused, concerns just what Götten himself has been up to and aided and abetted by whom. In the interview with Durzak, Böll resorts to the phrase 'dunkle Geschäfte', however the novel itself is even more cryptic, but also more teasing, on the subject.

⁹ 'Ich tendiere nur zu dem scheinbar Unpolitischen. Gespräch mit Manfred Durzak, Anfang 1975', in Heinrich Böll, *Werke: Interviews 1 1961-1978*, ed. Bernd Balzer, Cologne 1978, pp. 333f.

¹⁰ For details, see Hanno Beth (ed.): *Heinrich Böll. Eine Einführung in das Gesamtwerk in Einzelinterpretationen*, Kronberg/Ts., 1975, pp. 57f.

There are a number of surprising discrepancies between what Böll says in his interview with Manfred Durzak and the way things are presented in *Katharina Blum* itself. In the interview, Böll talks differentiatingly of Götten's 'Verbündete' and his 'Mittäter', presumably referring only to the latter as being two in number, whereas the novel's more imprecise mention of 'Bundeswehrangehörige oder deren Frauen, darunter Offiziersfrauen' (p. 175) and its lack of distinction between 'Verbündete' and 'Mittäter' inevitably gives the impression of a much larger group of people (although, tellingly, we never hear of Beizmenne's 'Verschwörungstheorie' being applied in this context, even though it is the most inviting one of all). In addition, the novel's Ludwig Götten is not, as Böll's innocuous phrase would have it, merely any old Tom-Dick-or-Harry 'Typ, der klaut', but someone who has quite specifically absconded from, of all places, the military. He has taken both a gun and substantial amounts of money in a calculating manner (hence the reference to 'Bilanzfälschung' on p. 174, suggesting that he had carefully sought to cover his tracks). Given that the issue of premeditation occurs in the case of Katharina Blum's actions, it is worth bearing in mind that Götten's behaviour does appear to be premeditated, even if hers does not. Moreover, all this is combined with surely the most intriguing detail of all: the fact that Götten seems to be in league with a whole group of people, mainly from the officer class. The novel's equivocations leave us in the dark about what Götten has accomplices in (embezzlement? long-term systematic appropriation of military funds? a symbolic protest against conscription?). Instead, it uses the kind of vocabulary which suggests a very different scenario from that implied by the verbs 'klauen' and 'abhauen' in Böll's interview with Durzak. If the author had intended the information grudgingly given in Section 48 to resolve all the questions the reader may have about Götten's status, then it would have been easy enough not to include the details about his phone-calls from Sträubleder's country house and to make less of the way in which he still remains in contact with army colleagues and their wives.

Especially given that this work comes not that long after *Ende einer Dienstfahrt*, I would like to suggest that *Katharina Blum* is capable of more interpretations than the corrective assertions made by Böll in the interview with Durzak allow for. Indeed, since we are dealing with a novel where the contrast between what is revealed and what still remains below the surface waiting to be drained is repeatedly stressed (particularly in Section 2), it would be somewhat surprising if this were not the case. In the words of the narrator: 'in dieser Geschichte passiert zu viel. Sie ist auf eine peinliche, kaum zu bewältigende Weise handlungsstark . . . es ist alles zu durchlässig . . . es geschieht so vieles im Vordergrund, mehr noch im Hintergrund' (pp. 131, 134). In fact, contrary to Böll's assertions about how 'eindeutig' the truth about Götten turns out to be, there is still much unfinished business in *Katharina Blum*, even by the time we get to the end of the novel.

When either the police or the 'ZEITUNG' speculate during the course

of the novel about just what Götten has done, certain phrases crop up repeatedly. Early on, Kriminalbeamtin Pletzer tries to put Katharina in the picture by telling her that Götten is 'ein lange gesuchter Bandit' and goes on to embroider on this by explaining that he is 'des Bankraubes fast überführt und des Mordes und anderer Verbrechen verdächtig' (p. 27). Later on we learn, again from a member of the Kripo, that Götten at one stage changed 'siebenhundert amerikanische Dollar' into Deutschmarks, unaccounted for funds 'die wahrscheinlich aus einem Bankraub stammen' (p. 99). Beizmenne, when interrogating Katharina about the provenance of her expensive ring, points out that 'im Zusammenhang mit einer Ermittlung, in der es sich um einen des Raubes überführten Verbrecher handelt, der dringend mordverdächtig ist, ist ein solcher Ring keine Kleinigkeit' (p. 71). Although Beizmenne here makes the same meticulous legal distinction as Frau Pletzer does between the concept 'überführt' (i.e. assumed guilty beyond reasonable doubt, albeit not yet proven so in a court of law) and 'verdächtig' (suspected of being guilty, but with as yet less evidence to support the charge), he talks merely in general terms of 'Raub' rather than 'Bankraub', which would at least seem more appropriate to the circumstances since it could refer either to his absconding with the Porsche or with the 'Bundeswehr' funds. Yet even in a land which puts a high premium on Porsches and is noted for its methodical thoroughness, the police's response is difficult to explain without digging deeper. When Götten is mentioned publicly, by the 'ZEITUNG' or the police, the stress is either generally on his being 'ein gesuchter Schwerverbrecher' (p. 93), a 'Bandit' (pp. 46, 48, 98, 157) or a 'Räuber und Mörder' (p. 155, this description, needless to say, coming from the 'ZEITUNG'). That he is a 'Bundeswehrdeserteur' is – significantly – only highlighted within the context of more private investigative discussions (e.g. p. 60). The full picture is withheld from the public.

The most straightforward reading of all this would, of course, still be that we are dealing with a highly complex situation, where a volatile political climate (of the kind that did undoubtedly exist in the Federal Republic at this time) leads to a state of virtually institutionalised paranoia where unsubstantiated charges and rumours fly around; where the lines of communication are so diverse that it is at times unclear whether these emanate from the press or the police; and where the majority of people involved are less machiavellian in their conscious assumptions than victims of the mood of the time. However, given the narrative approach that the novel displays to what Brecht would call 'die Vorgänge hinter den Vorgängen', such a reading may amount to something of a 'Verharmlosung', either on the part of the reader or the Establishment, or both. For there is more than a suspicion that there may be more lurking below the surface than this. Götten may not be a bank-robber or a murderer; but he may also be more than just a mere opportunist who has absconded with Bundeswehr money to which he has access. Böll is not Kaiser or Hitchcock, and *Katharina Blum* is not *Von Morgens bis Mitternachts* or *Psycho*. Since the surface expla-

nation of someone fortuitously absconding with a large sum of money and then being followed by the police for well over a year appears a little implausible, it is possible that a more devious reading – according to which the seemingly excessive police interest in Götten is *not* disproportionate (except if one believes the story about him which is peddled near the end of the novel) – has more in its favour than the police would wish to emerge. If the novel has Götten abscond with army money and has him specifically retaining contact with army colleagues and their wives, then the reader has sufficient grounds to speculate whether there may after all be a form of ‘Verschwörung’ going on here which Beizmenne has not recognized or, if he has, which he and his superiors do not wish to surface. If this is conceivably the case, then the emphasis on the fact that Götten is no more than a small fish, a robber and a deserter, would be to divert attention from the more disturbing possibility that the Bundeswehr, of all places, is harbouring dissident elements within it. The novel *Katharina Blum* remains equivocal on the matter, of course. But it does not close the door on this possibility as tightly as Böll did in his interview with Durzak. Indeed, a number of the more sinister features of the police’s behaviour become more plausible if such a further dimension to the Götten story is posited. Such a reading would possibly preserve the previous image of Moeding intact. He would be the front man whom the powers-that-be leave speculating about various irrelevant forms of ‘Verschwörung’ while never suspecting the one which would be the most destabilising possibility of all. And, once their own suspicions of a conspiracy had proved groundless, both he and the press would be encouraged to engage in a certain trivialising of the hunted man’s activities by seeing them as no more than crimes against the person and property.

At the end of *Katharina Blum* the enigma remains. There is much unfinished business, despite the ‘facts’ which trickle through in Section 54. And such unresolved elements allow for the possibility of a much more sinister picture of the Federal Republic: one according to which the manipulation of information is more controlled and insidious than it would have been in a society in which various misunderstandings eventually give way to the unequivocal truth about Ludwig Götten.